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ABSTRACT

Given the fact that adult citizens of non-English speaking background (NESB) in Australia are actual or potential bilinguals, this paper argues that developing or enhancing those bilingual literacy skills is beneficial to both individuals and Australian society as a whole. The viewpoint is based on a research project with NESB women. Barriers to achieving bilingual literacy are numerous, including teacher attitudes towards using literacy resources in the community at large and in the family. Examples of important factors are the adult ability to learn in independent groups and the inclination of adults to teach their children and others. Additional potential resources are professionals and paraprofessionals such as librarians, bilingual community workers, and other literate volunteer workers, including unemployed or retired citizens. It is suggested that if appropriate mechanisms were in place to use these human resources, they could help extend and strengthen the impact of bilingual literacy programs. Contains 24 references. (Author/LB) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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REALISING ADULT BILINGUAL LITERACY: WHAT IS REQUIRED?

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ABSTRACT

Adult citizens of non-English speaking background (NESB) in Australia are actual or potential bilinguals. The paper, based on a research project with NESB women, argues that to develop or further enhance bilinguals' literacy skills benefits both the individual and Australian society as a whole, especially given the present emphasis on industry restructuring. Barriers to achieving bilingual literacy are numerous including teacher attitudes towards using literacy resources in the community at large and in the family. Examples of these resources are the adult ability of learning in independent groups and the inclination of adults to teach their children and others. Apart from the adult learners themselves there are professionals such as librarians, and para-professionals such as bilingual community workers and a host of potential literate voluntary workers who may be unemployed or retired or simply sufficiently interested in helping others to develop biliteracy skills. The paper suggests that if these human resources were explored by setting up appropriate mechanisms they could help extend and strengthen the impact of bilingual literacy programs.

REALISING ADULT BILINGUAL LITERACY: WHAT IS REQUIRED?

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a research study, *The literacy needs of non-English-speaking background women*, funded and published by the Division of Further Education, Ministry of Education Victoria (Foster and Rado 1991a).

The paper is one of a trio of papers concerned with literacy in the Australian context. The first, *Literacy needs of NESB women: Implications for education and training* (Foster and Rado 1991b), reviews the main education and training issues raised in the reserach study. The second and third discuss biliteracy. This present second paper looks at biliteracy from the point of view of mother tongue or first language (L1) literacy, the third, *Strategies for expanding learning opportunities for NESB adult literacy learners*, (Rado and Foster 1991a) is concerned with English or second language (L2) literacy.

The 1990 International Literacy Year served many useful purposes. One of these was to draw attention to the fact that literacy is not a simple skill and therefore not easily definable. One solution to the problem of defining was to postulate three degrees of literacy: "basic literacy", namely the ability to read and write your own name; "functional literacy", namely the abilty to read and write well enough to accomplish simple and everyday reading and writing tasks in your particular society; and "active literacy", namely the capacity to think, create and question which helps to participate more effectively in society (cited in Foster and Rado 1991a).

In Australia these definitions are interpreted in terms of monolingual literacy

skills and yet, at least one quarter of the population are actual or potential biliterates. Consequently apart from degrees of literacy one should also consider types of literacies. These are

> monolingual literacy in English - the majority of the Australian population belongs to this category including some with a non-English speaking background;
>
> monolingual Language Other Than English (LOTE) literacy - some non-Eglish speaking background migrants fit into this category; and
>
> bilingual literacy in English and in a LOTE - this category includes both native and non-native speakers of a LOTE, the former being in the majority.
> (Cited in Foster and Rado 1991a)

Advantages of biliteracy: practical arguments

Arguments in favour of biliteracy include both practical and scientific considerations. The practical considerations of maintaining and/or developing L1 literacy skills cover various aspects of a person's private life and working needs as an employee or self-employed.

In the private domain one can think of the important role L1 literacy can play in keeping in touch with one's family through correspondence. One must also remember that many adult L2 learners find it difficult to keep informed about the world through reading newspapers in English, yet this information is accessible to them in their mother tongue. Similarly, they would have difficulties in reading for pleasure in L2 but not in L1. Their leisure reading might include a wide range of subjects besides fiction. In brief, they need their L1 literacy skills to satisfy their cognitive needs as mature members of this society.

Language maintenance in the home also has affective and

cultural implications. Since the mid 1970s we have interviewed several hundred NESB young adults and parents of kindergarten, primary and secondary school-age children. Over 90 per cent of these expressed strong sentimental attachment to the mother tongue which they regarded as an integral part of their identity and culture. They felt that passing on their language to their children played an important role in mutual understanding and harmony in the home. Undoubtedly, if parents have literacy skills in their mother tongue language maintenance in the home can be made more effective.

The usefulness of biliteracy in the workplace has been documented by various conference papers and reports, for example, by the Australian Advisory Council on Language and Multicultural Education (AACLAME) Conference (1990) called *Language is good businesss* and by *Bilingual professionals in the workforce* research report (Borland, George and Rado 1989). The latter showed the range of LOTE which were an advantage in the industries investigated. Japanese and German are more likely to be useful in the trade, finance and business and Tourism sectors, whereas Arabic, Chinese, French, Greek, Indonesian, Italian Macedonian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese were more needed in the community service areas.

Workers in these industries use their L1 skills when interacting with non-English speaking outsiders, namely clients in Australia or overseas. Bilingual skills, however, are also often required within an enterprise to ensure efficient internal communication. Pleasingly, in the process of award restructuring some industries, notably Textile, Clothing and Footwear, are considering to recognize and reward bilingual skills which at the lowest level of proficiency might take the form of

communicating about the job in hand with fellow workers on the shop floor. The Public Service Commission (1990) can serve as another example. It is interested in utilising the bilingual skills of its staff to induct new NESB workers and to support existing NESB staff. In order to do so it advocates the keeping of information on employees with regard to their level of skills in LOTE. Hopefully, the growing recognition of bilingual skills will be reflected in employees' pay packets.

Before moving on it might be interesting to pause for a moment to compare the degree of congruence between the languages identified as useful in the workplace and the list of priority languages the Commonwealth is prepared to assist. State and Territory Ministers are advised that they can choose eight languages from a proposed list for inclusion in their education program. The languages the White Paper (1991:16) and the Borland and al. report (1989) have in common are: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Spanish and Vietnamese. The Commonwealth has added four languages: Aboriginal, Korean, Russian and Thai. The Borland and al. report names a further two languages instead of these four: Macedonian and Turkish. From the national interest point of view it does not seem to be too difficult to come to a consensus on the LOTE which are to receive support. It is clear that the financial resources available for LOTE tuition, not only in times of recession, but at any time, have their limits. It is therefore reasonable to prioritize languages. Even so the nationally less significant languages deserve attention. We hope to show that they can be catered for to some extent by means which are outside formal instruction provisions.

Advantages of biliteracy: psycholinguistic arguments

Besides practical considerations there are also psycholinguistic arguments in favour of bilingualism and hence also biliteracy. Some influential figures in the debate on bilingual education have been Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976) and Cummins (1978, 1979). They are the original advocates of the threshold/interdependence theory which has given riese to the "sequential" bilingual education model. This type of bilingual program develops the mother tongue, including literacy skills, before giving formal instruction in reading and writing in L2. It is argued that a child needs a well developed L1 in order to acquire the academic level in L2 required for school learning. This has now been questioned by, for example, Edelsky (1986) whose research study shows that a bilingual's languages mutually support each other so that dual or simultaneous literacy acquisition is possible and profitable.

On the basis of the sequential bilingual education model some literacy teachers believe that this is the correct approach in introducing adults illiterate in their L1 to literacy in L2. As Kalantzis (1986) points out there is no convincing research evidence that this is the case. In other words, to treat L1 literacy as a crutch for reaching L2 literacy, and then not to pay further attention to L1 literacy, cannot be advocated in good faith. To continue to develop both L1 and L2 literacy to a high level is another matter.

Cumming's (1989:9) research study shows that in cognitively demanding linguistic tasks literate expertise transfers crosslinguistically independently from fluency in L2. Benedetto (1985) has obtained similar results in studying the use of top-level organizational strategies in text comprehension. If these findings are reliable

then developing high literate expertise in L1 may well be a useful and viable strategy for raising the literacy level in L2.

The results reported by Cumming were based on a study of French/English bilingual university students in Canada. The study evaluated the quality of their reading comprehension and summarising of a challenging text in L1 and L2. Apart from high literacy in L1, the ability to contextualise a given passage proved the most important factors in succesfully completing the task in L2. This highlights the role of the relevant knowledge readers bring to a text so that they can meaningfully interact with it. Consequently Cumming suggests a course of action which favours the development and use of L1 for purposes of contextualisation and the transference of higher order literacy strategies thus speeding up the L2 learning process.

WAYS OF IMPLEMENTING BILITERACY

If biliteracy is desirable, how is it to be achieved? It can be done by using the language resources in the community and in the family.

Reading circles: Using language resources in the community

What we call "reading circle" is often referred to as book club or discussion group. Recently the Sunday Age has published an informative article on the activities of book clubs (Dempsey 1991:11). Members of such a club meet regularly to talk about the book they have chosen for discussion. The Council of Adult Education (CAE) has been servicing such groups with a selection of books and discussion notes for the last fifty years. CAE does not supply discussion leaders as these adult groups seem perfectly capable of looking after their own affairs. Some groups which have started

with CAE now operate independently; others have been autonomous from the start. Groups usually meet once a month to discuss books. Some book clubs, besides sharing their reading, engage in a variety of other leisure activities. Whichever is the case the significance of these clubs lies in the intellectual stimulation they offer their members. In the words of Dempsey (1991:11)

> But there is something else happens in the groups: intellectual life swells. Ideas are snatched from the pages, characters parade around the lounge room, voices are raised in excitement, in anger, in bliss. In the sheer bliss of being able to talk about the books.

If it is possible to set up leisure reading circles for intermediate and advanced readers of English, we see no reason why this should not be possible for LOTE readers with various degrees of reading fluency. The cognitive advantages should be similar. We anticipate, however, that the practicalities will be more complex. (For details of English reading circles for NESB readers see Foster and Rado 1991a and Rado and Foster 1991a.) In setting up LOTE reading circles several factors have to be taken into consideration.

The first of these is the provision of appropriate meeting venues for adult biliteracy groups. Venues can range from mainstream literacy provider premises to private homes. This implies in some instances the use of public libraries, the premises of city councils, various community and learning centres and religious and ethnic associations. It is envisaged that such venues would be made available free of charge.

The formation of biliteracy groups can come about in various ways. ESL teachers interested in setting up independent English reading circles could suggest to their students to form a reading circle also in their LOTE. Librarians, various types

of bilingual workers, counsellors and other individuals administering services to NESB migrants could also suggest such a move. Further the possibility of joining a bilingual reading group could be advertised in the print and electronic media, in schools and other educational institutions, in libraries , municipal, and relevant local and federal government offices and on the premises of community and ethnic associations and centres, in supermarkets, bookshops, but also in other shops, and of course through networking among the NESB population.

In order to ensure a supply of targeted materials for LOTE reading circles the cooperation of libraries, bookshops and newsagencies needs to be enlisted. Such materials are not only books but also magazines and newspapers. These materials would have to be evaluated, classified and those deemed suitable for reading circles, provided with discussion notes in print and/or on audio cassettes. This is work that could be done by volunteer literate NESB individuals with interest in reading. The "good music" radio station 3MBS-FM is an admirable example of how effectively volunteer labour can be used to serve worthwhile community interests. We believe that among the LOTE tertiary students, the unemployed and the retired NESB population there are a sufficient number of individuals who could enrich both the knowledge of others and their own and so gain personal satisfaction from participating in such a scheme.

Before such work is undertaken, however, it would be wise to ascertain the reading tastes of the different language groups taking gender, education and age into account. In this respect a beginning has already been made by Ashby and Whitehead (1988) who have shown that NESB adults rely heavily on public libraries. So a

potential readership does exist. They have also found that the different language groups differ considerably in their reading tastes which range over fiction, travel, biography, history, practical subjects, magazines and newspapers. This type of investigation should be sponsored by all public libraries in Australia for their own clientele.

Bilingual writers of discussion notes are not the only personnel required for the formation and operation of independent LOTE discussion groups. Other personnel include bilingual workers who could look after the various modes of publicity including the particular technique of networking to facilitate participation. The "access and equity" model developed by the Women's Ethnic Network of Victoria (1990) can serve as an example. This model offers carefully orchestrated procedures of how to assemble and run ethno-specific groups for the purposes of decision making for future action. Group members are offered a choice from a range of options. If the formation of reading circles is envisaged this would be one of the options. If this option were chosen it would augur well for its future success because participants had a say in its establishment.

In the case of the LOTE reading circle it may be necessary to attach a permanent discussion leader to the group. Such a leader needs training. Interestingly CAE does not provide such help to its reading groups although occasional contact with a tutor is possible. This could be due to the fact that the CAE groups have come forward entirely on their own initiative and are intermediate or advanced readers. But this is not necessarily the only type of independent study group in existence. According to some adult educators adults learn best in independent groups supported

by a teacher who does not teach them directly but is available for consultation or teaches through a selected member of the group. Such independent groups are currently in operation in the workplace in Victoria (Virgona 1991).

Experience in the United States also shows that literacy programs can operate successfully with part-time teachers, paraprofessional and/or volunteer staff as long as due attention is paid to student retention. For example, the *Jefferson County adult reading program* (Darling 1988) has found that regular attendance was more important with respect to achievement than teachers, methods and materials. Consequently, counselling was integrated into the program to address the personal and social needs of adult learners. If such counselling is necessary - some of our data also suggest that it is (employer representative interview Foster and Rado 1991a) - then counsellors should be available for in-servicing staff and for looking after difficult cases.

Of course librarians are needed to organise the selection and distribution of reading materials which should ideally include audio books. The National Library already has such books available in English. These are advertised in *Link Up*, a National Library newsletter concerned with library services for people with disabilities. Obviously NESB readers as such are not disabled but it so happens that following a printed text as it is read aloud is good practice for non-fluent readers.

Students of languages which are studied at post-secondary level could also profitably participate in reading circles as readers, discussion leaders and discussion guide writers. Trained language teachers could also help with the latter.

Family and Intergenerational Literacy Programs: Using language resources in the family

Reading circles explore the literacy resources which exist in the community at large, family or intergenerational programs explore the resources which exist within families. Family and intergenerational programs incorporate a fairly new approach to educating members of a family as a group rather than as individuals. Here only the literacy aspect of such programs will be discussed.

Family education programs are spreading in the United States. Nickse (1990) in her overview of such programs presents evidence of their success. One of the arguments in favour of these programs is the non-threatening nature of the learning situation, the beneficial effects of members of a family supporting each other in learning and the economy of coordinating services and linking the teaching of adults and children.

Peer or sibling programs can be similar to intergenerational programs. For the sake of simplicity only the latter will be discussed here. For our purposes we name as the basic learning unit two family members working together, usually one adult and one child. One of the pair would be the "literacy learner" and the other, the more fluent reader, we shall call "helper".

The scheme is already used in Australia to promote mother tongue literacy in English. In this case it can be assumed that the helper will be an English-speaking adult tutoring a child or adolescent with reading difficulty in English. We believe that the same scheme could be used for NESB families who want to keep the LOTE reading skills of their members alive. This is the focus of interest here.

It could be used, however, in the reverse case in NESB families where the

parents' literacy skills in English are weaker than those of their children. In this case the child would assume the role of helper and not the parent. The objection could be made that in some cases this might not be culturally appropriate. There would be other cases, however, where this is a possibility. Our research data collected over the years indicate that many parents use English with their children, although it is an interlanguage English, because they think they can learn English from them. Reading English could be regarded as an extension of talking in English with them.

There is a range of models for family tuition programs with various degrees of expertise and training required by would be helpers. The models presented here are adapted from Toomey (n.d.) to serve the needs of NESB families at beginner but also more advanced levels. They are more interactive than the models presented by Toomey. It is assumed that learner and helper will together select the reading texts.

Model A - Listening Method

Procedure: The helper listens enthusiastically and with full attention to the learner reading aloud and answers the learner's questions about pronunciation and meaning but does not interrupt the reading with corrections or questions.

Training of helper: Literate adults naturally know how to read to and with their children. Nevertheless some may need short discussion session and the opportunity to observe kindergarten and junior grades during "reading time" to ensure that they interact appropriately with the child they are tutoring.

Benefit to helper: Attention to pronunciation, meaning and reading material selection raises linguistic awareness.

Benefit to learner: Non-threatening practice with self-selected reading

material. The satisfaction of receiving sympathetic attention from a significant adult. Better understanding of a text because of the opportunity of asking questions.

Model B - Paired Reading Method

Procedure: Helper and learner read aloud simultaneously or the helper reads first followed by simultaneous reading. The helper corrects errors according to a scheme worked out in some detail. The helper gives clues and asks questions to aide the learner in self correction. If the learner fails to self-correct the helper supplies the correct form and gives the necessary explanation. The helper praises the reader whenever possible.

Training of helper: The helper needs one or two training seessions to become familiar with methods of praise and correction. In particular how to help the reader to self-correct.

Benefit to helper: The helper is stimulated to think about the text.

Benefit to the learner: The learner has a positive learning experience and can gain greater confidence because any difficulties are immediately resolved.

Model C - Pause Prompt Praise Method

Procedure: There is discussion throughout the reading. Partners read aloud together. Errors are corrected by helper modelling. Learner is encouraged to read independently and gets praise when choosing to do so. Helper pauses to allow time for learner to self correct.

Training of helper: Helper participation is more active than in Models A and B and therefore requires more preparation involving more training, professional

supervision and observation of tutoring sessions.

Benefit to helper: Exercising literate skills, for example paraphrasing in the course of discussions with the learner.

Benefit to learner: Learning how to unravel the meaning of a text.

It is important to note that all three procedures contain an element of interaction between helper and learner so that the learner is actively involved. According to Liddicoat (1990) this is the crucial difference between media and live tutor mediated reading, the latter being far superior to the former. Liddicoat explains that it is not the reading aloud of a story as such that matters, but rather the interaction between reader and listener in which the story is embedded (1990:109).

Families need to be informed about and supported in participating in home reading programs. Perhaps a body like the Division of Further Education might coordinate the activities of the various institutions, organisations and associations which could participate in this scheme. The cost of training parents would be relatively small since it is a very modest program. It is expected that schools could play an important role since the scheme would benefit their students as learners of a LOTE.

As indicated earlier family literacy programs for NESB families can also target ESL literacy. In this case the English literate children can act as helpers to their interlanguage speaking parents. The models presented earlier would have to be adapted for that purpose.This topic warrants detailed exploration in another paper. (See Rado and Foster 1991a&b.)

A pleasing feature of the family and intergenerational literacy scheme is the bringing together the school-age and the adult learners and the organisations responsible for their educational needs in LOTE or in English. The success of family literacy is also of interest to employers and the nation who need a literate workforce.

CONCLUSION

We have presented two ways of upgrading adult bilingual literacy. They are adapted from models currently operative in Australia. We hope that the proposed schemes, if not singly then at least in combination, would help to raise the literacy skills of NESB immigrants. The additional modes of reading practice we advocate would be relatively cheap, promote marketable skills and enrich family life in an enjoyable way. In short, these reading activities by upgrading NESB migrants' literacy skills would benefit them as individuals and the Australian society as a whole.

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